

Mark 13:1-8 After The Paris Atrocities

I was going to talk about cathedrals today. I had written a sermon about cathedrals. This morning's gospel reading records that Jesus' disciples saw the Temple and remarked

"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

I was going to talk about large stones and cathedrals. Then, like so many others, I sat up on Friday night watching the news reports from Paris and it dawned on me we would need a different kind of sermon this morning. We need to think about what has happened in Paris and I think that same gospel reading can help us.

What we heard was St Mark, chapter thirteen. It is what scholars call *The Little Apocalypse*. *Apocalypse* is a Greek word, it means an *uncovering*, an *unveiling*. Mark Thirteen aims to show us something we would not normally expect to see and it is unsettling,

nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows. ⁹ But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils Mark 13:8-9

And this passage has a tone and style you do not find in the rest of this gospel. Mark is a bustling, breathless book, ram jam full of incident, healing miracles and argument with Pharisees. Listen to the way the gospel is told if you read the Authorised Version.

And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. ¹⁸ And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him. And when he had gone a little further thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother... And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee ... And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught. Mark 1:17-21

Do you see? Mark has pace and energy. Mark does not a step back to take the long view of Jesus, it is not a theory about Jesus; it's a tumbling compendium of little stories and sayings. *Do you remember when Jesus said that? Do you remember when he did this?* We need to notice this, need to recognise the point he is making. Mark is the gospel that reminds us that God did not send Christ so that we could say clever things in cathedrals. God did not send Christ so we could have theories. God sent Christ so that we could see that right at the heart of our faith is the business of living. Christ lived amongst us so that we could learn to live. So, Mark focusses relentlessly on what Jesus said and what Jesus did.

Yet here, in this morning's gospel, Jesus suddenly stops, almost mid stride, and looks into the future. This passage, is startling, all those

wars and rumors of wars, ...earthquakes in various places; ...famines.

It just does not read like the rest of the gospel. In fact, scholars have suggested that Mark might have been a bit creative here; suggested that Jesus did not actually speak all these words.

Now, that argument about precisely what Jesus said, or did not say, is technical. It can lead us to miss the point. What we *do* know, what we *absolutely do* know, is that Jesus talked about a coming crisis. Think of all those parables about keeping awake and not knowing the day or the hour, think of Jesus talking about coming judgment, think of that saying about setting fire to the earth. Do you know what the first words we hear Jesus say in this gospel? The very first thing he says is

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel Mark 1:15

The time is fulfilled. That is the sense of this passage, that we have come to, a particular moment, there is a sense of crisis.

nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines

There is urgency, there is passion and this is what the gospel is all about – *the time is fulfilled*. We come to a crisis.

So, Mark is focused on Jesus. Mark is fascinated by Jesus. *Do you remember when Jesus said that? Do you remember when he did this?* And Mark is a gospel with a brooding sense of crisis. Something happens in this gospel that does not happen in any other gospel. Mark takes us to the limits of what we know. Mathew and Luke start cautiously like good biographers, with a birth; John starts with a thoughtful theological introduction. Mark does some else altogether. Mark starts out in the wilderness (a very strange place for good news). He starts with a great roar of prophecy, John the Baptist declaring 'Make straight the paths of the Lord'. It is unsettling, it's radical. John is in the Judean wilderness, a place of mountains and valleys of constantly twisting roads. He imagines there a royal highway, he imagines the wilderness re-fashioned, a new creation. This gospel is unsettling from the first.

No surprise then, that in Mark, the disciples are wrong-footed from the first. They are bewildered, bemused, rushing off in the wrong direction, leaping to the wrong conclusion. This crisis and this strange, compelling, yet unpredictable Saviour have them baffled. This gospel plunges us into the turbulence of disease, the violence of an empire, the volatile excitement of a crowd. It puts Jesus at the eye of that storm. It surrounds him with confused, bewildered disciples.

So, it is important we notice words tucked into this morning's apocalyptic gospel. Before Jesus sets out his vision of crisis, he speaks to the disciples. 'Do not be alarmed' he says, *Do not be alarmed*. When the tide rises, when the fire burns; when nations rage, *Do not be alarmed*.

The point about terrorism is that it seeks to live up to its name. Its object is not reform, or the redress of grievance or social change. The object of terrorism is to create terror. The only object of terrorism is terror. It wants us afraid, insecure. It wants us hopeless. Terrorism seeks to break our confidence. It wants to break our confidence, shift all our landmarks. Terrorism wins when we can no longer trust the patterns and routines we live by.

Do not be alarmed. Do not be alarmed. This is precisely the world Mark knows. Mark has described to us the rising tide and the raging of nations. Mark imagines this, describes this and still Mark trusts. That is significant. Terrorism would prefer us to think that we have come to a place we had not imagined. Mark will not allow that. We can call terrorism brutal and cruel, but we cannot call it unimaginable. This too is a world that God knows and can redeem. Into this violence steps Jesus and he preaches love of God and neighbour, preaches compassion, he preaches hope. Jesus steps into this violence, dies as it turns on him. Rises over it

The mistake we could make now is to suppose that violence, hatred and cruelty are new and unfamiliar. The mistake we could make now is to suppose that we are newly desperate and that there is no longer a map and compass to steer by. *Do not be alarmed*. The gospel never promised we would live safe, never promised that it would all be predictable. What the gospel promises is that when crisis comes, life will be redeemed. *Do not be alarmed*. The temptation is to think that events in Paris make life meaningless and all our plans futile. That is the aim of terrorism, to confuse. It is to the terrified that Jesus speaks. He does not say that terror will stop any time soon. Nor does he call his followers to flight or fight. Instead, he tells them not to be alarmed, because the God of all our origins is still the God of all our conclusions. We will meet confusion, but it does not have to define us. It does not have to be the last word.

We must accept our fears, know them, name them. It is what Mark does and he sets them in a bigger purpose. We must not let fear define us. *Do not be alarmed.* It is so easy for us to inhabit fear this weekend, so easy to let fear define our thinking. *Do not be alarmed.* Christ calls us to the trust that terrorists would deny us, trust in the past and the future, trust in God, trust in mercy, compassion and love. This is a time for faith not fear. *Do not be alarmed.*